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When do stories change our minds? Narrative persuasion about social problems

Francesca Polletta | **Nathan Redman**

Department of Sociology, University of California

Correspondence
Francesca Polletta, 3151 SSPA, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697.
Email: polletta@uci.edu

Abstract

Scholars in a number of disciplines have sought to assess the power of reading or viewing a personal story to modify people's beliefs. However, the research, which has been pursued under diverse programs, has produced conflicting findings. We focus on the persuasiveness of personal stories about problems that are structural (rather than individual) and whose solution requires government action. Overall, the research suggests that although personal stories *can* overcome people's tendency to resist new information, they often do not do so. People's preexisting beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes affect their willingness to be absorbed by a story, to empathize with the stories' protagonists, and to endorse the message communicated by the story. We argue also for a sociological perspective on narrative persuasion, one which, unlike the mostly experimental research conducted so far, pays attention to the context in which people encounter stories and to the norms shaping people's assessment of a story as credible, relevant, and important.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, storytelling has been touted as capable of changing public opinion on issues ranging from childhood obesity, sex trafficking, and the refugee crisis to climate change and wealth inequality. Personal stories or narratives (we use the terms interchangeably), whether communicated in person, in print, or online, have been credited with motivating both individual action and support for government action on important social problems. In line with this enthusiasm, government agencies, advocacy groups, and nonprofits now spend considerable time and money on public storytelling campaigns, often assisted by storytelling consultants (Polletta, DoCarma, Ward, & Callahan, forthcoming).

Usually, though, the case made by storytelling experts for stories' persuasiveness consists of little more than the fact that human beings are "storytelling animals" or are "hardwired for stories" (Polletta et al., forthcoming). This

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vagueness is perhaps surprising given the existence of a large and proliferating scholarly literature on the elements of narrative persuasion. Under different headings—*episodic framing* in political science, *exemplification* and *personalization* in media studies, the *identifiable victim effect* in studies of decision making, and *entertainment–education* and *narrative persuasion* in communication and public health—researchers have produced thousands of studies assessing the power of stories or story characters to change people's opinions. Relying mainly on experiments, these studies have sought to demonstrate both the mechanisms by which narratives persuade and the conditions under which they do so.

Yet, it remains difficult to make a definitive statement about narrative's ability to alter preexisting beliefs. In fact, as we will show, research findings are outright contradictory. One should be able to synthesize the findings to arrive at the conditions in which certain kinds of stories about certain issues work to persuade certain audiences in certain settings. But this kind of synthesis has been made difficult by the fact that scholars working in different disciplines are rarely in communication with each other. Add to that the fact that different studies have compared stories variously with statistics, logical arguments, or no communication at all. They have assessed stories told for very different purposes—to encourage women to screen for breast cancer, for example, or to build public support for government aid to the poor—and they have measured different outcomes: changes in audiences' perceptions, their behavioral intentions, or their behavior. Finally, the fact that research on narrative persuasive has been almost exclusively experimental has made it difficult to answer questions about the social contexts in which stories are persuasive, questions that we argue are crucial.

Our aims in this essay are twofold. First, we try to extract findings from the literature that are most relevant to sociologists. Accordingly, we focus on *social* factors accounting for stories' persuasiveness, leaving aside individual psychological factors such as people's variable need for cognition. We also focus on stories' influence when it comes to *issues requiring government action* (such as inequality) rather than issues requiring individual action (such as wearing sunscreen). Our second aim is to make the case for a distinctly sociological perspective on narrative persuasion. Such a perspective treats the capacity to persuade as socially organized. The power of stories, like that of any communicative form, depends as much on the authority of the communicator and the institutional norms of the context as on intrinsic properties of the form (Polletta, 2006; Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). Such a perspective also recognizes that a story's meaning, like the meaning of any persuasive utterance, depends in part on the background stories against which it is heard (Loseke, 2011; Polletta, 2006). Those background stories, multiple and variegated, together constitute a kind of common sense in relation to which particular stories are heard as coherent, credible, and as having a particular meaning. In the following, we highlight points at which such a perspective may help to account for contradictory findings in the research on narrative persuasion, as well as to answer questions that remain unanswered.

Although recognizing their sociological relevance, we do not weigh in on questions about whether stories are a fundamental mode of cognition or whether they are central to individual and/or collective identity. There are substantial bodies of literature devoted to those propositions (see, e.g., Bruner, 2009; Prins, van Stekelenburg, Polletta, & Klandermans, 2013), and our focus here is more narrowly on storytelling as a mode of persuasion. After defining a story, we rehearse two mechanisms of narrative persuasion identified by communication scholars. Then we turn to literatures in political science, media studies, communication, public health, and psychology that provide insight into the conditions for (and obstacles to) narrative persuasion around social problems. Those conditions include features of the topic, features of the audience, and features of the context, and we discuss each in turn.

2 | HOW DO STORIES PERSUADE?

A story is an account of a sequence of actions in the order in which they occurred to make a point (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Stories usually include characters, who are human or humanlike in their perceptions and attributes (Toolan, 2012). In most stories, the protagonist has a goal or desire that is somehow frustrated, and subsequent

events depict the struggle to attain that goal or desire. The resolution of the test, conflict, or decision tenders a larger normative point. But few stories say "and the moral of the story is…" Rather, stories are allusive. They demand the audience's imaginative efforts to connect characters' intentions with subsequent events and to connect the story's dénouement with its larger normative point (Polletta, 2006).

Communication scholars argue that stories persuade in a way that is fundamentally different from non-narrative messages (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Audiences typically process nonnarrative messages either centrally, where they scrutinize a message and evaluate its claims critically, or peripherally, where they absorb a message casually, judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or by their mood in the moment. Peripheral processing may lead to temporary attitudinal change, but it typically does not last. To get people to change their opinions requires that they process information centrally, but they are unlikely to do so unless they have a strong stake in the issue. This poses a real challenge to persuasion. But people seem to process narrative by a third route. Even if they do not care about the issue treated by the story, they may be "transported" into the story, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions that the story's characters do (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The experience of transportation seems to lead audiences to change their opinions in line with the story's message. For example, subjects who were highly transported by a story of a young girl's murder by a psychiatric patient reported beliefs consistent with the story, notably opposing freedoms for the patients of psychiatric institutions (Green & Brock, 2000). To probe the dynamic involved, researchers asked subjects to circle every "false note" they saw in the story. The more subjects agreed that "activity going on in the room around me was not on my mind" while reading the story, the less they tended to see such false notes. This suggests that people transported by a story suspend their tendency to counterargue, that is, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information they encounter and, as a result, tend to embrace the message conveyed by the story (see Slater & Rouner, 2002 for another version of the argument and Krause & Rucker, 2019 on how stories affect counterarguing when the facts they include are strong or weak).

Along with transportation, communication scholars have identified a second route to narrative persuasion. In this one, audiences identify emotionally with the story's protagonist. Their feelings of empathy lead them to oppose those who stand in the way of the protagonist's achieving his or her goals and/or lead them adopt the protagonist's views as their own (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016). For example, after reading a story about two sisters debating how to care for their terminally ill mother, subjects who read a story told from the perspective of the sister who favored euthanasia were more likely to endorse euthanasia as a policy than those who read the story told from the perspective of the sister who favored long-term care (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; see also Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014).

It is not clear whether the mechanisms of transportation and identification are mutually exclusive, nor whether one is more likely to operate in some circumstances than the other (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010 suggest that the two are distinct processes, and see Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010 on how both transportation and identification overcome resistance to persuasion). Together, however, the mechanisms also raise questions about the conditions in which people are likely to be transported by a story and/or to identify with the protagonist. As we will discuss, these are not at all obvious.

3 | STORIES' SUBJECTS: EPISODIC FRAMES, EXEMPLARS, PERSONALIZATION, AND IDENTIFIABLE VICTIMS

Much of the scholarship on narrative persuasion has been pursued under the rubric of health education. Two meta-analytic studies found that, compared with statistical information, stories were more effective in promoting health-conscious behavior (de Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016; Zebregs, van den Putte, Neijens, & de Graaf, 2015). But the issues that sociologists are interested in are structural in origin and demand government action for their resolution. Such issues engage people's beliefs about the proper scope of government, about whether social problems owe to

individual pathologies, and about the deservingness of particular social groups. Are stories capable of changing people's beliefs about these kinds of issues?

Research relevant to the question has been pursued by scholars studying episodic framing, exemplification, and personalization in the news media and the identifiable victim effect in individual decision making as well as those studying narrative persuasion. We note that exemplars, episodic frames, personalization, and identifiable victims are not strictly the same as stories. For example, an exemplar in a news story may be a quote that vividly captures people's experience of the issue; it need not involve a person recounting a story (Bigsby, Bigman, & Gonzalez, 2019). However, exemplars are something like story characters, as are identifiable victims. Similarly, an episodic news frame, which focuses on individual people and events, may not recount in full an individual's experience, but it does personalize the issue in a way that is consistent with, and often relies on, stories. Studies in these research programs have documented mechanisms that are similar to those responsible for the ability of full-blown stories to persuade, but they have also identified important conditions for their effects, as well as dynamics that may thwart persuasion.

In a series of studies, Iyengar (1987, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010) distinguished between news coverage taking a *thematic* and an *episodic* form. The latter is common: A story on poverty begins with a portrayal of a family on welfare or a story on unemployment features a person who has lost a job. Rarer is news coverage taking a thematic form, relying on statistics and other kinds of information to document the structural source of the issue and its broader consequences. Iyengar found that episodic framing in news coverage led viewers to attribute the social problem portrayed to individual traits and behaviors. In narrative terms, viewers focused on the character and on what the character had done to bring about her fate. In line with that attribution, viewers favored individual behavioral change rather than government action to combat the problem.

Iyengar's arguments were striking because they seemed counterintuitive. Journalists themselves believe that "putting a human face" on a social problem helps to bring home the problem's severity (Hinnant, Len-Ríos, & Young, 2013). Are they wrong? Research in another program, on exemplification in the news, suggests that they are not wrong. Indeed, vivid stories sometimes may work *too* well. The key is that news items featuring the testimony of ordinary people are easily remembered. As a result, such exemplars exercise a disproportionate influence on audiences' perceptions of the scope of the problem covered. Indeed, when presented with numerical data or statements by officials outright contradicting the statements of the ordinary people featured in the news, audiences still believe the latter (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Lefevere, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2012; Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996). But vivid exemplars and personalized news stories are also effective in communicating the responsibility of government and other powerful entities for problems such as farmers' indebtedness and the lack of full rights for lesbians and gay men. Personalized news stories do not, as Iyengar maintained, communicate merely the responsibility of the victims who suffer from the problem (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vreese, 2015; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Grabe, Kleemans, Bas, Myrick, & Kim, 2017; Zillmann et al., 1996).

What accounts for these very different findings? One explanation is that Iyengar focused on the cognitive processes involved in episodic framing, not the emotional ones. When Aarøe (2011) measured subjects' emotional response to an issue framed either episodically (in terms of an individual's experience) or thematically (in terms of the issue's broader causes and consequences), she found that the more the episodic framing elicited feelings of pity and compassion for the protagonist and anger and disgust toward those responsible for the problem, the more subjects expressed opinions in line with the frame. By contrast, the persuasiveness of the thematic frame did not depend on subjects' emotional response (see also Gross, 2008; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The power of stories, this suggests, lies in their capacity to elicit empathy for the protagonist and, as a result, support for the larger cause (Bas & Grabe, 2016; Grabe et al., 2017). For example, subjects who were initially opposed to same-sex marriage or a path to citizenship for immigrants were more likely to endorse those policies after they read a personal story about those issues rather than numerical information (Worjcieszak & Kim, 2016). Stories' effect was magnified when subjects were encouraged to put themselves in the protagonist's shoes. Their empathetic response, moreover, was a function of their immersion in the story. Thus, the mechanisms of identification and transportation demonstrated in narrative persuasion around health here operated in response to stories about politically controversial issues. The findings are

also in line with research in psychology showing that people are more likely to donate money to a cause represented by a single identified victim than one represented by a number of victims (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). The mechanism posited, again, is one of empathy and distress for the person suffering.

However, not all stories produce empathetic responses, and empathy does not always guarantee audiences' support for the story's message. A meta-analysis of 41 studies of the identifiable victim effect showed that the effect overall was small and that it depended on a number of conditions, among them, that the victim was a child, that the source of need was poverty, and that the victim was not seen as responsible for his or her plight (Lee & Feeley, 2016). Another study showed that where it was possible to blame the victim, exposure to an identified person *decreased* subjects' willingness to help (Kogut, 2011). Studies of exemplification similarly suggest that audiences need to be convinced of the victim's blamelessness in order to be persuaded of the story's message (Hoeken & Hustinx, 2007). For example, experimental subjects were more likely to empathize with homeless people, give money to anti-homelessness organizations, and support government action to help the homeless when they received cues indicating that the person featured was homeless because she had had breast cancer, lost a job, or been the victim of domestic abuse (Gross & Wronski, 2019).

The question, then, is how one convinces audiences that the story's protagonist is not to blame for his predicament. One would think that personalizing the story—making the protagonist a real person rather than an anonymous “poor person” or “drug user”—and giving audiences access to the protagonist's inner emotional state as he struggled with a situation that was not of his own making would do that. Accordingly, a study varied the degree to which a story was personalized and the degree to which it focused on the protagonist's internal emotional experience (Zhou & Niederdeppe, 2017). The story was about a 15-year old boy who struggled with obesity as the result of living in a neighborhood without access to nutritious food. Surprisingly, however, subjects who read a version of the story with *more* information about the boy and his perceptions and emotions were *less* likely to empathize with him and *less* likely to support public policy to combat food deserts.

Perhaps the explanation is that Americans tend to see obesity as a failure of individual will rather than a failure of the market, society, or policy. The same is true of many social problems, though, including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, inequality, drug and alcohol addiction, and sexual assault and harassment. If stories work the way they are supposed to, the empathy they spur for the story's protagonist should provide a counterweight to audiences' prior individualistic beliefs. But, again, this may not be true. Exposed to a description of a person in economic need, research subjects with strong individualistic beliefs blamed the person for his plight and opposed government action on poverty (Feldman, Huddy, Wronski, & Lown, 2019). This is not surprising. But researchers also measured subjects' natural capacity to empathize. They found that individualists who were highly empathetic were even *less* likely to feel compassion for the needy person and less likely to support government action to help. The authors surmise that highly empathic individualists “down-regulate” their feelings of discomfort when the empathy-eliciting information challenges their preexisting ideological beliefs. For our purposes, the implication is that even if audiences identify with or feel empathy toward the story's protagonist, their prior ideological beliefs may intervene between the feeling of empathy and their judgment of the character and of the appropriate response to the problem.

Together, these studies indicate that audiences' entrenched views of social problems and, in particular, their view of social problems as the result of people's poor choices are a steep barrier to stories' capacity to persuade. Those preexisting beliefs may discourage audiences from empathizing with stories' protagonists or they may prevent audiences from taking from the story the message that supportive public policy is necessary to solve the problem.

4 | STORIES' AUDIENCES: WHO IS “LIKE” THE PROTAGONIST?

We noted earlier that scholars have attributed the existence of conflicting findings in studies of exemplification and personalization, on one hand, and studies of episodic framing, on the other, to the latter's failure to take account of audiences' emotional response to vivid exemplars. There is another explanation for the discrepancy.

Where exemplars typically are described as "ordinary people," episodic framing studies tend to feature criminals, mothers on welfare, and other stigmatized groups (Boukes et al., 2015). Several authors have cited this point to argue that vivid exemplars—story characters—are likely to be persuasive only when they are from the same group as the audience. For example, white American study subjects supported a more generous immigration policy when the photograph accompanying a news story depicted light-skinned immigrants. Where the exemplars were dark-skinned, subjects favored steeper restrictions on immigration (Ostfeld & Mutz, 2014; see also Andersen, Skovsgaard, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2017).

However, what leads audiences to perceive an exemplar or story character as from the same group as them is by no means objective. Hoeken et al. (2016) cite several studies suggesting that, when it comes to identification, a perception of the character as psychologically similar is more important than that he or she is demographically similar. Another study found that although subjects rated sex and nationality as important to their self-identity, story characters with those traits were not any more likely than characters without them to elicit subjects' identification or to persuade them (Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2018). It is likely, too, that the existence of a difference between audience and story characters is less important than how audiences feel about that difference. We cited the finding that when a homeless person was portrayed as a victim of circumstance, subjects were more likely to feel sympathy for him or her, to support government action on homelessness, and to donate money to an organization combating homelessness (Gross & Wronski, 2019). But subjects who were higher in racial resentment were less likely to donate when the protagonist of the story was African American, whether or not the person was portrayed as responsible for his/her homelessness.

In this vein, Hopmann, Skovsgaard, and Elmelund-Præstekær (2017) argue that findings about the importance of audience similarity may actually mask the operation of pervasive assumptions about who is socially deserving. Again, we come back to the power of the background stories and stereotypes in terms of which a given story is interpreted. Recall that stories rely on audiences' interpretive engagement: their willingness to draw connections between protagonists' character traits and their fate (Polletta, 2006). Audiences may make those connections based on stereotypes about how people of that type behave (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Such stereotypes may be held even by members of stereotyped groups. Thus, one study found that Black study subjects were as likely as White ones to believe that government efforts to alleviate poverty were inadequate after reading a story about White poor people and, as likely as White subjects *not* to take that message after reading a story about Black poor people (Hannah & Cafferty, 2006). Note also that audiences' identification with characters may not always diminish stereotypic thinking (McLaughlin, Rodriguez, Dunn, & Martinez, 2018; on the intersection of ideological beliefs and narrative, see Jones, 2014).

The background stories and stereotypes that pass as common sense may also shape audiences' estimation of the *typicality* of the experience described in a story. Recall the finding that vivid accounts of a phenomenon lead audiences to overestimate its incidence. For example, the more graphic a story subjects read about a carjacking, the more prevalent they believed carjacking was in their region (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). But again, the victims of these problems tended to be perceived as "ordinary" people and like the audience. What if the victim was poor, Black, an immigrant, a single woman on welfare, or otherwise cast as undeserving in terms of familiar narratives? We suspect that even if the story was perceived as credible and the protagonist as blameless, the experience might be seen as idiosyncratic or unusual rather than as representing a much larger problem. Pervasive stereotypes may lead audiences to hear even a poignant story as atypical. One study points to this dynamic. When health-care providers read stories about a physician's interaction with a patient of color in which the physician's willingness to listen empathetically eventually overcame the patient's distrust, readers liked the story and offered interviewers their own stories of overcoming similar barriers with their patients (Burgess et al., 2017). When providers read stories in which the patient's distrust was the direct result of racism he had experienced, some readers had a different reaction. Providers who believed that racial disparities in health care were the result of patients' behaviors more than providers' behaviors criticized the story as inauthentic and described the physician in the story as unlike anyone they knew. Readers' prior beliefs seemed to drive their perception of the representativeness of the story.

In sum, audiences' objective similarity to the characters depicted in the story may be less important than their estimation of the characters' social deservingness in determining the message they take from characters' experiences.

5 | STORIES' CONTEXT

Most studies of narrative persuasion are experimental. Subjects volunteer to take part and then are asked to view or read a story. Sometimes, they are instructed to allow themselves to be immersed in the story (Krause & Rucker, 2019) or to put themselves in the protagonist's shoes (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). Researchers then ask questions designed to measure subjects' absorption in the story or they go straight to questions about subjects' views of the story's topic.

Such experiments, although valuable, do not capture the ways in which people consume stories in the real world. They so very differently depending on the context. Most people simply ignore many of the stories to which they are exposed. They may follow all the way though with interest the story that is posted by a friend on her Facebook page, though, or the one told by a speaker at a fundraising luncheon for a cause they already support (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015 on Facebook). They may consider skeptically the story related by a political candidate they do not like or one that appears in a Youtube fundraising video. And they may listen in the way they are instructed the story they hear as a juror. However, we know relatively little about how the contexts in which stories are encountered affect a story's capacity to persuade (though see Polletta et al., 2011 on the institutional norms shaping storytelling).

Experimental work has suggested that the truth of the story is relatively unimportant to its persuasiveness (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Donahue, 2011). When told that a story is fictional, people who are transported by the story or identify with its characters are as likely to be persuaded by it as those who are told that a story is true. Being alerted that the story is intended to persuade, however, may be important (Slater & Rouner, 2002; but see de Graaf et al., 2016, who do not find that effect). Cued to an advertiser's intent, subjects read a story in the same way they did a logical argument: scrutinizing its claims rather than allowing themselves to be transported (Wentzel, Tomczak, & Herrmann, 2010).

This is important because much of the literature on exemplification and episodic framing examines stories in news coverage. Audiences may be less likely to see these stories as intended to persuade than they would stories produced by advocacy organizations or government agencies. On the other hand, given the contemporary political polarization of news sources, audiences may be especially sensitive to the purposes for which stories are told and especially quick to dismiss stories told by people perceived as being on the other side of a partisan political divide. In other words, if stories' persuasive effect depends minimally on audiences' being *open* to being transported by the story or identifying with its characters, there may be whole classes of stories, storytellers, and story sources that are incapable of surmounting that initial bar because audiences do not allow themselves to become even minimally involved with the story.

Practitioners of entertainment–education have responded to this problem by integrating stories promoting normative behaviors into popular fictional television shows (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Because viewers are already immersed in the show's main storyline and already identify with its protagonists, they should be more susceptible to the new message that is communicated. Popular television shows, accordingly, have had storylines devoted to safe sex, the dangers of drunk driving, organ donation, acquaintance rape, and many other issues. A meta-analysis of 22 studies of such initiatives found a small but significant effect on persuasion (Shen & Han, 2014). A sociological perspective, however, suggests that the institutional norms of television production may pose an obstacle to writing such storylines into shows. A study of the coverage of acquaintance rape in teenage television dramas over the course of 20 years found that writers were initially responsive to advocates pressing for a more feminist portrayal of acquaintance rape (Polletta & Tomlinson, 2014). The norm of novelty, however, soon led

writers to abandon that portrayal as they returned to using rape as a narrative device to advance a storyline that was about something else. In sum, we need a much better understanding of how stories' force is shaped by conventions of the settings in which stories are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from the often-conflicting findings on narrative persuasion? Most obviously that stories can persuade audiences, even hostile ones, but that they often do not do so. For groups trying to convince audiences that social problems are structural rather than individual and that they demand government action, the obstacle lies not so much in the stories they tell as in the stories they are heard with. Depending on those background stories and stereotypes, a story may be heard as emotionally touching or as manipulative and inauthentic. A protagonist may be seen as the victim of circumstances beyond her control or as someone who has made consistently bad choices. Her experiences may be understood as the tip of the iceberg of a much larger problem or as idiosyncratic, without much import for anyone else.

To be sure, personal stories can sometimes chip away at those background stories and stereotypes. The research suggests that featuring victims who are completely blameless—ideally, children (but possibly not fat children)—offers the best chance for changing audiences' opinions about an issue. Such a strategy poses other problems, though. It risks building public support only for policies that help the most blameless victims (e.g., support for abortion only in the case of fetal anomalies or support for "innocent" undocumented students at the expense of the "guilty" parents; Polletta, DoCarma, Ward, & Callahan, forthcoming) and/or fostering backlash against victims who do not meet that standard of blamelessness. In addition, though, if we think of a causal chain of persuasion running from audiences' openness to a story to their feeling empathy for the protagonist or suspending their tendency to counterargue to their accepting the message conveyed by the story, there are several points at which audiences' preexisting beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes may intervene. Such beliefs may discourage audiences from being open to the story if the story's teller or source signals that someone is trying to persuade them of something. If audiences do allow themselves to become involved in the story, their preexisting beliefs may prevent them from empathizing with the protagonist or lead them to read the story critically. And even if they do feel empathy, those beliefs may prevent them from believing that people like the protagonist would best be aided by government action.

To overcome obstacles like these probably requires stories that are sophisticated, not simple. It may also require taking issue directly with the background stories that pass as common sense. The latter may require stories about groups and institutions rather than individuals, and it may require arguments and numbers in addition to stories, and sometimes instead of them.

ORCID

Francesca Polletta https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2268-1911

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Francesca Polletta is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. She studies the cultural dimensions of protest and politics. She is the author of *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Univ. Chicago, 2002), *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Univ. Chicago, 2006), and *Inventing the Ties that Bind: Imagined Relationships in Moral and Political Life* (Univ. Chicago, In Press) and the editor, with Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, of *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Univ. Chicago, 2001). She is working on a book manuscript entitled *The Trouble with Stories*.

Nathan Redman is a PhD student at the University of California, Irvine. He is interested in cultural sociology and social movements and is currently working on a dissertation on doomsday/disaster preparedness advocates or "preppers."

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